

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Gilbert Grosvenor, October 14, 1906

359 MORAL EDUCATION IN CHILDHOOD . October 14th, 1906. Mr. Gilbert H. Grosvenor, 1328 18th Street, N. W., Washington , D. C. Dear Bert:—

I find myself here at the house-boat with Mr. Baldwin and I am trying to think up a few more reminiscences of my boyhood for your benefit. I haven't said anything so far about moral training in childhood, but this part of my education was by no means neglected.

As a child, I was deeply imbued with what maybe called the religious instinct, and this was developed to the utmost by my mother, and with such success that I am afraid I was quite a goody-goody boy — at least until I reached years of discretion !

My father and mother were regular church-goers although my mother was unable to hear anything that went on in church. We boys were accustomed to hunt out the passages in the Bible that were read from the pulpit, and my mother would read them to herself. We would also hunt out the hymns for her benefit and she would read them while the congregation sang. My father had invented a system of phonetic short-hand, and he used to take down the sermon in short-hand, and read it to my mother 2 360 When she got home. We boys also were questioned by my mother concerning what went on in church. We had to remember the text and give her something of the sermon. We attended a Baptist Church, but my father changed to another — I think the Presbyterian. The Presbyterian may have been the first and the Baptist last — I am not sure of the order now, but I remember the cause of the change. You will recollect that my father owned or rented a public hall in Edinburgh, known as Buccleugh Street Hall, where he gave public readings. He did not confine himself to Shakespeare, but was accustomed to read

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condensations of the best works of the best writers. He also presented to the public the works of new writers.

It so happened that he was the first to read in public the works of Charles Dickens. This was too much for the offices of the church to which he belonged; and a deputation from the church waited upon him to remonstrate against the reading of the works of such a man as Charles Dickens. This remonstrance however did not have the effect intended for my father publically critized the narrow-minded deputation and changed his church.

I must have been very impressionable in those days, for I remember on one occasion going inside the English Church with my parents, and feeling what a guilty thing it was to do. Nothing would have induced me to enter a Roman Catholic Church; and I had the feeling in those days that the English Church was really the Roman Catholic Church in disguise:— The difference being that the services were conducted in English instead of in Latin.

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361 In one corner of our garden at Milton Cottage, my father had built a photographic darkroom. He was interested in photography in the earliest days of the art — using the old wet process. We boys of course also learned photography. We used to coat glass plates with collodion, place them in a nitrate of silver bath; expose them; and develop them all by ourselves. There was only one thing that objected to:— My father did not think it wrong to take photographs on Sunday, and when one Sunday he wanted to take my picture my religious feelings found vent in words, and I told him that I thought “Sunday was a day for meditation”. I must have been a very little fellow at the time. My father laughed good-naturedly, and allowed me to do as I chose; and so I used to go into the summer-house in the garden every Sunday to “meditate” — although what I meditated upon I am sure I do not know. I only know that I used to sit there for a long time every Sunday by myself.

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My brothers, however, were not so particular. They liked to play on Sunday as well as on other days, and I myself was often tempted to join them, but it was with a guilty feeling as though I were doing something wrong.

One Sunday I played “Keek-boo” with my younger brother Edward. The greenhouse had windows that were swung on a horizontal axis only two or three feet from the ground opening outwards. On this occasion my brother was hiding under one of these open windows, but had put his head out under the edge of the sash to look out for me, when I suddenly appeared with the exclamation “Keek-Boo”. My brother instantly drew back his head with such force that the sharp edge of the window sash took his scalp right off excepting the front part near the forehead. I lead them into the house to my mother with his this scalp hanging over his face — bloody side out. Just imagine what a shock it must have been to her. I was too young to think of that.

My father put the scalp back in place, and I ran to Edinburgh for a carriage and a doctor. We drove him to our Edinburgh house. A barber was secured to shave his head before the surgeon could stitch on the scalp. The appearance of the head was so horrible that the barber fainted before he could complete his job. Then the time came to put in the stitches and I fled downstairs to the kitchen, and stuck my head out of the window with the sash on the back of my neck, so that I should not hear my brother scream. The fact was, however, that his sensibilities had been blunted, and he felt little or no pain, and did not give utterance to any cries. He recovered in a few days but bore ever afterwards a scar several inches long, which was only partly concealed by the way he wore his hair. I remember I used to consider this accident as a judgment of God for playing on Sunday, and my meditations in the summer-house were very earnest after that.

I was quite passionate as a boy; but while the pugnacious instincts of boyhood were well developed in me, I was too well trained by my mother to indulge in fights. When I went to the Royal High School, I was carefully warned by my mother about the wickedness

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of getting into fisti-cuff arguments. The other boys soon found this out, and they used to tease me 5 363 with the object of getting up a fight.

On one occassion a boy slapped my face; and after the first flush of resentment, I meekly turned to him the other cheek. The opportunity was too good to be wasted, and he gave me such a whack on the other cheek as effectually to arouse my fighting instincts. In a moment I pitched into him while the boys on the play-ground formed a ring, and we became the center of at least a hundred boys. How many rounds we fought I do not know, for suddenly a cry arose that one of the masters was coming. The crowd dissolved, and we were mixed up with the crowd. Then the school bell rang, and we went into our classes. I became very repentent for having disobeyed my mother, and for not following the teaching of the Bible. Upon leaving the classroom therefore, I did not seek to renew the quarrel, and the other boy avoided me. I never fought again on my own account; but I did pitch into other boys sometimes when they tormented my younger brother Edward. I had no hesitation in defending him to the utmost of my ability with the result that they speedily left him alone.

My brother Edward and I were thrown closely together while children, form the fact that we attended the same class and had companions in common. My brother Melville was my senior by two years, and was in a higher class at school. He had his won companions with whom he associated, and Edward and I were only his “little brothers” with whom it was a condescension to play. After passing through the whole curriculum of the High School, I associated more with my elder 6 364 brother, Melville, than with Edward— especially during the period when we were at work together on the construction of a Speaking-Machine. Our tastes were similar. We were fond of mechanical contrivances, and had a strong inclination towards scientific studies; whereas my brother Edward developed a taste for art which was fostered by our artistic mother. His pen and ink sketches and drawings were really quite remarkable for a boy. He died when about sixteen or seventeen years of age. Had he lived, I have no doubt that he would have taken to art as a profession.

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This dictation is sufficiently long, so I will stop now. It covers such a variety of topics, however, that I cannot give it a heading.